

“It is called a revolution!” – a weekly news review

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“Don’t call it a protest, it is called a revolution!” This was the call of several thousand workers from Iran’s Assaluyeh petrochemical complex who came out on strike on Monday. As the history of the 1978-9 Iranian revolution demonstrates, the intervention of the oil workers could prove a crucial development in undercutting the Iranian government’s ability to govern and in demonstrating that the regime does not hold all the power; however, outwith the Kurdish regions, the situation is still some way off from a decisive general strike. The International Marxist Tendency, in its search for workers’ action, noted on Tuesday that other (predominantly casual) oil workers and workers from several freight companies were also on strike. There is a nationwide students’ strike, and bazar traders in the main bazars of Tehran and in Shiraz

have joined those in the Kurdish cities in shutting down their shops. On Thursday, Iran News tweeted that work had stopped at an agro-industry company in Khuzestan, and there are likely similar stoppages in other companies that we have not got news of.

The government crackdown has intensified – most noticeably in Rojhelat, or Iranian Kurdistan – but this seems only to have made people more determined to bring an end to the regime and to ensure that those already killed have not died in vain. The internet has been largely shut down, especially in Rojhelat, but the messages and videos that have got out record protests continuing and spreading to new areas. They also record the security forces firing into people's homes. Across Iran, the number of people who have been killed by the security forces is in the hundreds. Others are injured and afraid to seek medical help for fear of getting arrested. Thousands have been detained by a regime known for torturing and killing prisoners. On Monday, Hengaw Organization for Human Rights tweeted that they had been told that “numerous civilians were detained during the conflicts last night... in Sanandaj, and that because all prisons and security detention facilities were already full, they were moved to warehouses at the end of Karamozi Street... Residents of the area state that they can constantly hear screams due to the violence and torture.” At least 28 children are known to have been killed and children are being detained in so-called “phycological centres”.

The exhilaration of mass resistance against decades of oppression is combined with an acute awareness of the possible consequences. On Monday, students of the Polytechnic University of Tehran were chanting “Bullets and guns are no longer working... tell my mother she no longer has a daughter” – meaning that she will be killed.

Syria

Islam is far from the only religion that has been used to justify tyranny, but it is the dominant religion in the Middle East, and so an important tool of power and oppression in the region. While much of the world is watching Iran, the actions of the various Sunni militias that hold sway in the Turkish controlled

areas of neighbouring Syria have been largely unobserved. These different groups are in violent competition with each other, and on Thursday Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly called al-Nusra Front) took over the whole of the city of Afrîn, which had been captured by Turkey in 2018. Afrîn and its surrounding district was one of the three original cantons of Rojava and the place where its model of grassroots democracy, women's freedom, and the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups was most advanced. Now it is under the control of a descendent of al-Qaeda.

HTS is the Salafi-jihadist group that controls most of the province of Idlib, which claims to be the last stronghold of the Syrian opposition, but which is effectively a Turkish protectorate. They formally split from al-Qaeda in 2016-17 and no longer openly call for global jihad. They aim for Islamic rule in Syria, and they maintain a degree of independence through taking over large parts of the local economy. Idlib has held off President Assad's Syrian Arab Army thanks to the major presence of the Turkish military, but HTS is separate from the mercenary groups that are paid by Turkey to act as its proxies and that are branded as the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA militias run the areas that were invaded and occupied by Turkey, where life has become characterised by extreme, often gratuitous, violence, and misogyny. HTS's move into Afrîn was made possible due to violent clashes between these mercenary militias, and the decision by some of these groups to ally themselves with HTS. As a result, HTS has been able to take control of the city, and of the towns and villages to its southwest, with relatively little fighting, and they could now be heading further northeast towards Azaz, where the opposing SNA militias have gone to regroup.

What this will mean for the city's already beleaguered population is unclear, but HTS's decision to evacuate Afrîn hospital in order to make their military base demonstrates that, for them, local people are far from a priority.

In the view of the Syrian Democratic Forces media centre: "HTS took control of Afrin with Turkey's blessings for field and political reasons, and the recent battles are just raising dust to cover up the Turkish role in turning the area into a safe area for ISIS and Al-Nusra and launching from it again into the Syrian interior."

For the SDF, all are occupying forces, and these remain “occupied areas that must be liberated”. This is also the view of the Syrian government – though they have a different vision of “liberation”. Implications for the much-discussed possibilities of rapprochement between Turkey and Syria are not yet clear.

Iran is active in Syria too, allied to President Assad’s Syrian Government, which, in return, has stated its support for the Iranian regime. (HTS regards the Iranian militias as bitter enemies.) Iranian foreign policy is directed towards carving their own niche in the Syrian economy and power structures. They use their oil wealth to win converts to their Shia Islam, and they attempt to destabilise North and East Syria and bring an end to its autonomy. The Iranian regime’s focus on foreign adventures rather than on supporting the increasingly impoverished Iranian population has contributed to the anger against it. Events in Iran will inevitably affect power dynamics within Syria.

In another entanglement of the geopolitical web, Putin’s Russia is also a friend of the Iranian regime. Putin has been pushing to accelerate Iran’s full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and, as we have just witnessed in Ukraine, Russia has bought Iranian drones. Meanwhile, Putin is strengthening bonds with Turkey, through plans to make Turkey a hub for the export of Russian gas.

On Wednesday, in another part of northern Syria, we were given a further reminder of the hollowness of America’s protestations of commitment to their Syrian Democratic Forces partners, when a drone from their NATO ally, Turkey, targeted a vehicle carrying Ibrahim Michael of the Syriac security forces and SDF commander, Shibli Derik. Michael was killed, and Derik, who recently managed joint exercises with the US-led International Coalition, was wounded. The Coalition has done nothing to prevent Turkey’s drone attacks, and did not even comment on this assassination.

The two men were on their way back from commemorating the murder, three years ago, of the well-loved Secretary General of the Future Syria Party, Hevrin Khalaf, who was brutally assaulted and executed by members of one of the Turkish-backed militias.

Turkey

Memories of Khalaf, who devoted her every waking hour to trying to build a better society and whose party was founded to bring together different ethnic groups and help people to determine their own democratic future, are particularly poignant, coming so soon after the assassination of the feminist writer and activist, Nagihan Akarsel, who was shot dead outside her home in Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, on 4 October. That Akarsel's assassination was planned by the Turkish secret service was never in any doubt, but Turkey's ambassador to Iraq has as good as admitted Turkish culpability. When asked about the murder at a press conference in Erbil, he responded, "Those who are affiliated with the PKK are indeed our targets". For Turkey, "affiliation with the PKK" has a very broad definition and includes any Kurd who follows Adullah Öcalan's ideas.

But murdering Akarsel was not enough. After her death, the Turkish state enforced major restrictions around her funeral. The burial, in her family village in the Konya district of central Turkey, could not take place until Thursday – nine days after her death – as bureaucratic hurdles were put in the way of sending the coffin by air. Before the ceremony, her family were told by the security services, "Slogans will not be shouted, we will break the fingers of those who make a victory sign, bury her in silence, if anything happens, we will burn this village down, we will drive you out of here". On the day itself, many of those who wanted to attend the funeral were denied entry to the village by police and soldiers and numerous checkpoints, and her family home and the cemetery were fenced off. This for a woman who dedicated her life to developing and promoting feminist ideas.

If this were any other people, the intensifying brutality by the Turkish state against the Kurds would be headline news – but even for a review focussed on Kurdish news, this can get knocked off the top slot by the enormity of events in other parts of Kurdistan.

The week in Turkey began, last Sunday, with a police attack on two Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) MPs, which left one, Habip Eksik, hospitalised with multiple fractures to his leg and a bloodied face. The MPs were attending a

demonstration marking the 24th anniversary of the beginning of the international conspiracy that ended in Abdullah Öcalan's abduction and imprisonment. At least 138 people were arrested in anniversary demonstrations across the country, including senior HDP officials and journalists. The authorities attempted to claim that the two MPs were playing acting their injuries.

The next day, police restricted another anniversary demonstration. This was for the 104 people killed, and many more wounded, when two ISIS suicide bombers blew themselves up at a peace rally outside Ankara Railway Station in 2015. The rally had been called by the HDP and other left groups in the run-up to the November general election, when their party was undergoing violent attacks. There are many unanswered questions about what happened that day and attempts at a proper investigation have been thwarted. A European Union intelligence report written three days after the attack observed: "The modus operandi of the attack (suicide bombers) points to Da'esh. Given the circumstances (arriving buses with demonstrators not searched, police almost absent at the huge demonstration), there is reason to believe that in this case, forces within the AKP [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party] commissioned the Da'esh operatives." Last Sunday, police restricted access to the site of the bombing to just the relatives of those killed.

On Tuesday, three political prisoners in Kilis Type L Closed Prison started an indefinite hunger strike as a last resort to press their demands for respect of their basic rights, including the right to prison visits. They had been promised these after a previous hunger strike, but when they had called off that strike the authorities had gone back on their word.

On Wednesday, Sibel Balaç, who is serving an eight and a half years prison sentence, saw her sentence postponed after a 298-day hunger strike that has left her so ill that she remains in hospital. Her basic demand is for a fair trial.

Wednesday also saw the fifth hearing in the trial of the murderer of Deniz Poyraz. He has confessed to deliberately attacking the HDP's İzmir office and,

when he found Poyraz the only person there, shooting her in the head to make sure she died. The opening of Bianet's report gives a sense of the deep destruction that has been wrought on Turkey's judicial system: "At the start of the hearing, the presiding judge decided that the attorney who joined the case with a document of authorisation had no authority and would not be allowed to take the floor. Later, a gendarmerie officer slapped Deniz Poyraz's sister, Kamuran Poyaz, and the police used tear gas in the courtroom. After the tension, the court board ruled that the case should be heard at the Şakran Prison campus in İzmir's Aliağa district, citing "security reasons." The lawyer for Poyraz explains that the court chose to move the hearings to the prison because "they thought it would move the case away from the public agenda." And, crucially, that all this is a distraction from the authorities' refusal to investigate the murderer's connections and to insist on treating the murder as simply the act of an individual.

It has also been reported that HDP MP, Semra Güzel, who was arrested at the beginning of September, was kept in a single person cell for over a month without being allowed to take part in any joint activities; and that her requests were left unanswered and her faxes undelivered.

Meanwhile, a "community policing" department in Kurdish majority Hakkari (Colemêrg) has been fingerprinting local children, leading to fears that the police are preparing to criminalise a future generation of Kurds. No one is convinced by the police statement that this is to help in case the children go missing, especially given the role of the police in actual cases of missing people.

For the future, we can expect to see even more court cases and even less freedom of speech. Much less. On Friday, in the face of international criticism as well as opposition protests, the Turkish parliament passed a law that will bring in prison sentences of one to three years for "disseminating misleading information". This will apply to social media users as well as professional journalists, and the chilling implications of its loose catch-all phrasing are obvious – especially in the run up to a vital election. Politicians from the

opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) have announced that they will be seeking an annulment of the legislation from the Constitutional Court.

The "censorship law", as it has been called, claims to promote "public peace", but this is not something that Turkish government ministers feel the need to adhere to themselves, even in other countries. This week Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu met with representatives of the Turkish community of France at the Turkish Consulate in Strasbourg. He told them that some Armenians in France were opposed to Armenia normalising relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan and that "You must raise your voice in a more organized manner against the Armenian diaspora". This needs to be understood in the context of Turkey's continued refusal to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide, and of a pattern of racist attacks by Turks against Armenians.

Iraq

I will finish back in Strasbourg, but, before I do, I should mention a further piece of Middle Eastern News. Just over a year after the Iraqi election, Iraq's political parties have finally agreed a compromise choice of president, enabling the first step towards the formation of a new government. Unwritten rules designate the role to a Kurd. The man chosen is a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), but unlike his party colleague who he replaces, he has the support of the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The election had been called early in response to massive protests against poverty and poor services and against a corrupt political class unaccountable to the people and dominated by the competing interests of Iran and the United States. The current unedifying politics offers little hope of significant change.

Strasbourg

Back in Strasbourg, Turkish democracy – or rather the lack of it – was discussed in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on Wednesday. In 2017, Turkey was put under a monitoring procedure, and this week, the politicians were debating and voting on the mid-term review.

Despite its diplomatic language, the monitoring report made some strong criticisms; however, as always these were blunted by the introduction that “acknowledged” that Turkey faces “severe terrorist threats”. The War Against Terrorism is, of course, Turkey’s excuse for refusing to engage with the Kurdish Question. Instead of allowing “anti-terrorism” rhetoric to delegitimise the Kurdish struggle, we need to delegitimise that rhetoric.

Apart from the usual suspects of Azerbaijan, and – naturally – the representatives from Turkey’s ruling AKP, the politicians who spoke were supportive of the report’s criticisms, but it was only the HDP’s Hışyar Özsoy, speaking for the Left Group, who insisted that the report should produce action and not just more words.

A world away, on the other side of the road from the Council building, Kurdish groups from different parts of Europe and different organisations staged a sit-in over the four days of the Parliamentary session. Their aim was to draw attention to the anniversary of the plot against Öcalan and to his continued mistreatment, which breaches all the standards that the Council of Europe was established to maintain. The demonstrators made an unmissable statement opposite the Council steps, and although the great majority of the politicians preferred to keep to the safety of their side of the road, there are also some good friends among the Assembly members who are helping to give Kurds a voice in international politics and who came out to speak at the demonstration.

This was a large and noisy demonstration, but every day for the last ten years there has been a vigil for Öcalan outside the Council buildings. This week saw the launch of a website giving background information and news about the vigil – so next time you want to know the difference between the Council of Europe and the European Union, or what CPT stands for, or you want a concise introduction to Öcalan’s life with links to campaigning organisations and writings on his ideas, then you can check out ocalanvigil.net.

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